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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: RIVERS GOVERNOR DISCUSSES CURRENT NIGER DELTA
CONFLICT WITH AMBASSADOR

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Classified By: Ambassador Robin Renee Sanders for reasons 1.4(b) and
(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On May 21, 2009, in a private meeting at Government House in Port Harcourt, Rivers State Governor Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi shared his views on the Niger Delta issue with the Ambassador. He blamed poverty and perpetual Federal Government inaction for the recent flare-up in Delta State. He is opposed to the increased military intervention that is now taking place in Delta State and initially denied the Ambassador's concerns about the safety of civilians saying, "The fighting is in the creeks so how can they kill civilians?" The Ambassador challenged this claim, stating that camps along the creeks are small communities with civilian inhabitants, which the governor eventually acknowledged saying, "Yes, I guess there has to be civilian casualties." Amaechi then reiterated his claim about the Federal Government's incompetence in the region, stressing that basic services are still not being provided. Additionally, he implied that there was corruption and a bias against his state since five ministers and the vice president all come from the same ethnic group in neighboring Bayelsa State. He stressed that the fighters are no longer a disorganized militancy, but rather a highly coordinated criminal mafia that is well armed and profiting richly from oil bunkering, targeted kidnapping and strategic weapons accumulation. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On May 21, the Ambassador traveled to the Niger Delta to host a forum for civil society leaders on election reform and democracy issues in Port Harcourt, Rivers State (septel). While in Port Harcourt she paid a courtesy visit to Governor Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi at his office. In a private meeting with the governor she raised the issue of the current flare-up in the Niger Delta and expressed her particular concern for civilian casualties. Governor Amaechi blamed the federal government for perpetuating poverty in the region due to its inability to address basic social needs. While he justified his own use of force to demolish camps in his state and prevent oil bunkering, he said he has personally told the President to keep the military out of the region. (Comment: Governor Amaechi in the past has depended on the Joint Task Force (JTF) to demolish camps and hideouts of militias linked to his rivals, but he may be more resistant to the federal government allowing the JTF a free hand in his state, which is now the case in the Delta State conflict. End comment).

¶3. (C) The Ambassador expressed the USG's concern over reports of increased civilian casualties. The governor initially denied these reports saying the real issue was that the federal government does not have a strong press corps within the military to share with the

public what is actually going on. He contrasted this with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) calling it a "propaganda machine" that can spin any issue, and that if, for instance, the number of deaths starts to rise "MEND will call it genocide." He doubted that civilians were being killed as most fighting was in the creeks. The Ambassador quickly challenged this assumption saying that many of the camps in the creeks are communities with civilian inhabitants. Amaechi then surmised aloud that he would have to agree with the Ambassador that there had to be civilian casualties.

14. (C) Throughout the meeting Governor Amaechi referred to "militants" in the Niger Delta as "a highly organized criminal mafia," more than a militant group. He said the term was something of a misnomer since they are not essentially political as oil bunkering and kidnapping have allowed the militants to organize and develop into mafia-like businesses. He fears that with more strategic weaponry, even claiming militants have surface-to-air-missiles (Comment: Post believes this to be highly unlikely. End Comment.), the federal government will be increasingly unable to effectively use military force to stop the crisis. He highlighted his state's success at demolishing camps before they are built by tearing down houses and cutting off oil trading on the high seas.

15. (C) Comment. Amaechi continues to challenge the effectiveness of military intervention in the Niger Delta, and seemed to imply that other states should just use his method of getting tough on security and taking out the camps before they develop. However, he wants to have his cake and eat it too by trying to allow only as much JTF activity as suits his personal political purposes. Up until now this seems to have worked, but recently the Federal Government appears to have pushed him and his private agenda aside as they stepped up counter attacks in Delta State without bringing in Delta Governor Uduaghan. Time will tell how Amaechi's REAL interests - which are

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likely the accumulation of his own power and wealth - are served by this latest outbreak of violence. End comment.

SANDERS